

JOHN STOW

An Address delivered at the Church of St. Andrew Undershaft on 7 March, 1962
in the presence of the Rt. Hon. Sir Cuthbert Ackroyd, Lord Mayor (locum tenens),
on the occasion of the Society's Annal Stow Commemoration Service.

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We commemorate this day the services which John Stow of London rendered to his native city and the cause of history. Some men learn their history from manuscripts, others from books. John Stow did both these things but through his genius and devotion he made also the churches and streets of this city to yield up their secrets. The old cry, if the stones could but speak, was answered in his writings; and his writings have outlasted the very stones themselves.

He was born in 1525, the son of a merchant tailor and, in due course, followed his father in his trade. But his trade did not prosper, for his heart was elsewhere. By the time that he was 35 he had produced his edition of Chaucer's poetry; and for the next 45 years until his death at the age of 80 in 1605 he was engaged in his life work of compiling a history of England, which we now know as Stow's *Annals*, and a detailed street-by-street description of London, which we know as Stow's *Survey*. Being a great historian he looked back upon the past without ever losing sight of the present, believing as he did that history is not a dead thing of no consequence but the continuing and unbroken process of a nation's destiny. And these are Stow's words in the dedication of his *Survey* to Sir Robert Lee, then Lord Mayor of London;

I have attempted the discovery of London, my native soil and country. . . . It is a duty that I willingly owe to my native mother and country. . . . What London hath been of ancient time, men may here see, as what it is now every man doth behold.

I shall do as he might have done, therefore, and look back on Elizabeth's England—which was Stow's England—and see what it has transmitted into our own day. If, today, I am more concerned with the ideas than the buildings that have come down to us, I never forget that many of these ideas found expression in the city churches where Stow worshipped and among the citizens with whom Stow lived.

If we look back to the London of four hundred years ago, to 1561, we find this account in Stow's *Annals*:

This year was such a scarcity of wheat and other grain that Sir William Chester, Mayor of London, and other the principal magistrates of the city, were forced to make provision for wheat and rye from beyond the seas, to a great quantity, which was a relief, not only to the citizens but to the countries near adjoining.

The London of 1562 was indeed a city of poverty, sickness and a renewed war with France. And then towards the end of a disastrous year, Queen Elizabeth herself fell

desperately ill of smallpox. Anyone looking at this nation in 1562 might understandably have said that our greatness lay in the past; that there were good prospects for the historian but few for posterity. The English empire on the continent which had lasted for centuries had, by the beginning of the reign, gone for ever. Our national treasury was empty; our people impoverished; our nation divided. Had Elizabeth died in 1562, as she might have done from smallpox, then England would almost certainly have been given over to civil war. But, as we know, the nation survived, and when the queen died long afterwards in 1603, and John Stow followed her in 1605, England stood at the brink of her imperial greatness.

What ideas inspired Englishmen to greatness in the decades which followed 1562 and will they inspire us again? The first question, as an historian, I believe that I am able to answer; the second I must leave to the statesmen of today and perhaps to my successors in this pulpit in 400 years' time.

I would put first a sense of unity and purpose: the sense of belonging. For, although England had its social grievances and its social disorders, it also had its social conscience. If this is the age of:

Hark, hark the dogs do bark,
Beggars are coming to town.

it is also the age of social experiment and social advance. And here London led the way. At the beginning of the 16th century to be poor and unemployed was taken to mean wilful idleness; by the end of the 16th century it had called forth a vigorous policy of social responsibility—for the sick, the aged, the children, and the unemployed. If anyone will ask: when did the welfare state, as we know it, begin? the answer is, not in 1947, but in Elizabeth's England and in Stow's London. I believe that this sense of social responsibility gave to the nation a unity which could stand up to the pressures of a civil war in the 17th century and other things since then.

The social responsibility was extended also to those who came here from abroad as refugees or as workers, from Germany, the low countries and France, bringing us new ideas and techniques—the East Anglian textile industry owed much to them, so did metallurgy. It is true that there were sometimes hostile scenes in the streets of London against foreigners but the Lord Mayor and the city authorities at once intervened to restore order and fair play. 'By the especial grace of God and bounty of our princes' wrote the Reverend William Harrison, ' . . . if any come hither from other realms, so soon as they set foot on land, they become so free in condition as their masters.' I am afraid that this was more of an aim than a reality, but it is important that the aim was there.

I believe that the second cause of our survival and prospects of greatness in the Elizabethan period was this. When so much of Europe was being torn by ideological warfare—expressed in those days in religious terms, Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anabaptism, and Catholicism—this country was never torn asunder as were France and Germany. Religious differences of course were heard and some of the greatest martyrs of this period were Englishmen. But the queen strove unceasingly for her middling policy: unpopular with the extremists, essential to the nation if it was to survive. These were the formative years of Anglicanism; the church as we know it is the church as she made it then, moderate, broad in its foundations, sturdy, built to last. Because we had so few religious excesses

the nation stood as one before, during and after the Armada crisis of 1588. Without that sense of unity and a love of the liberty they fought to preserve, we might well have emerged as an imperial satellite of a powerful Spain.

If there was a sense of unity and liberty, there was also a sense of greatness in ways which the historian can discern but not always define. The passion to discover the world and to colonize part of it was an impressive feature of the people of Elizabethan England, because on the whole they believed that their way of life was good and worth preserving. And all this was echoed, inspired and re-inforced by the greatness of the literary efflorescence. We remember:

This England never did—nor never shall—
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,
But when it first did help to wound itself.

But if we remember that William Shakespeare was the queen's fellow countryman, we should remember also that he was only the greatest among giants—Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, Christopher Marlowe, Richard Hakluyt, Sir Walter Raleigh, famous men working in this city, yes, and John Stow also, historian of London.

Unity, liberty, social responsibility and a sense of greatness, these things drove the Elizabethans towards the lengthening horizons of their purposes. I believe that the momentum of these purposes are still after 400 years far from spent.